

Message Text

PAGE 01 PEKING 01351 01 OF 02 080650Z

12

ACTION SS-30

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FM USLO PEKING

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 953

INFO AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

AMEMBASSY TAIPEI

AMEMBASSY TOKYO

AMCONSUL HONG KONG

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 PEKING 1351

EXDIS

DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO SECRETARY'S PARTY AND CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1

TAGS: PINT CH AS

SUBJ: MAO OBSERVED

1. THOUGH MENTALLY ALERT, MAO TSE-TUNG PHYSICALLY IS SO FRAIL WITH AGE THAT ANYTHING MORE THAN A CAREFULLY CONTROLLED ADVISORY ROLE IN THE MANAGEMENT OF CHINESE AFFAIRS IS HARD TO CONCEIVE. THIS WAS BASIC IMPRESSION WHICH AUSTRALIAN AMBASSADOR FITZGERALD, FIRST RESIDENT DIPLOMAT TO SEE CHAIRMAN FOR YEARS AND ONE OF THE RARE CHINESE SPEAKING FOREIGNERS TO HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY, CARRIED AWAY FROM MAO'S INTERVIEW WITH AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM NOVEMBER 2.

2. MAO'S LIBRARY IS IN A NONDESCRIPT BUILDING NESTLED AMONG OTHER UNDISTINGUISHED STRUCTURES CLOSE TO THE TREE-LINED CHUNG NAN LAKE JUST WEST OF THE FORBIDDEN CITY. THE LIBRARY, ENTERED FROM THREE DOORS SIDE-BY-SIDE ALONG A LONG CORRIDOR/ANTEROOM IS SPACIOUS AND WELL LIT WITH SKYLIGHTS AT THE FOUR CORNERS OF THE ROOM. A BED IS THERE ON WHICH THE CHAIRMAN TAKES RESTS. HE APPEARS TO SPEND A GREAT DEAL OF TIME IN THIS ROOM. CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 PEKING 01351 01 OF 02 080650Z

3. USHERED INTO THE LIBRARY BY NEW PARTY VICE CHAIRMAN WANG HUNG-WEN, WHITLAM AND FITZGERALD FOUND THE CHAIRMAN SITTING DOWN. HE ROSE TO HIS FEET AND CAME TO GREET THEM UNASSISTED. SHAKING HANDS, HE EXPRESSED PUZZLEMENT

AS TO WHO FITZGERALD WAS. THE FIRST PART OF THE CONVERSATION CENTERED AROUND DOMESTIC POLITICS, TENTH PARTY CONGRESS, SEARCH FOR REVOLUTIONARY SUCCESSORS, LIN PIAO, AND OTHER TOPICS. WHITLAM BORE THE BURDEN OF QUESTIONS, WITH MAO PROVIDING SINGLE SENTENCE ANSWERS SO SOFTLY UTTERED AND SO HEAVILY FLAVORED WITH HIS HUNANESE ORIGINS THAT FITZGERALD, WHOSE SPOKEN CHINESE IS EXCELLENT, COULD HARDLY UNDERSTAND A WORD.

4. DURING THIS EARLY PART OF THE EXCHANGE, FITZGERALD HAD THE IMPRESSION THAT THE CHAIRMAN WAS FEEBLEMINDED. NANCY TANG, THE YOUNG BROOKLYN-BORN INTERPRETER WHO HAS BECOME A REGULAR PART OF MAO'S ENTOURAGE, INTERPRETED WHITLAM'S QUESTIONS IN A DELIBERATE VOICE AT DICTATION SPEED. ASKED HOW HE HAD DISCOVERED WANG HUNG-WEN AND SINGLED HIM OUT FOR ELEVATION TO SUCH A HIGH PARTY RANK, MAO WHISPERED SLOWLY IN REPLY, "I DON'T KNOW." LATER, HOWEVER, WHEN CONVERSATION MOVED TO BROADER SUBJECTS, THE CHAIRMAN BECAME MORE RESPONSIVE, TAKING THE LEAD, AND HAD NO DIFFICULTY RELATING IDEAS TO ONE ANOTHER. QUERYING WHITLAM ABOUT AUSTRALIAN POLITICS, FOR EXAMPLE, MAO ASKED PRIME MINISTER WHETHER HIS LABOR GOVERNMENT DARED TO MAKE REVOLUTION. WHITLAM ANSWERED THAT HE FAVORED EVOLUTION RATHER THAN REVOLUTION, WHICH INSPIRED MAO TO LAUNCH INTO A BRIEF BUTLEARNED DISCUSSION OF DARWINISM. WHEN A TECHNICAL QUESTION ON THIS SUBJECT AROSE THAT NO ONE COULD ANSWER, PREMIER CHOU SUGGESTED TO MAO HE LOOK THE MATTER UP IN HIS "ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA". CHOU SAID HE HAD A BRITANNICA OF HIS OWN BUT LITTLE TIME TO CONSULT IT.

5. THE CHAIRMAN BROUGHT UP QUESTION OF NUCLEAR TESTING. WHITLAM SAID THAT AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE WERE AGAINST TESTING OF ALL SORTS, BUT MADE A DISTINCTION BETWEEN THOSE COUNTRIES LIKE CHINA WHO WERE UNDER GENUINE THREAT AND OTHERS LIKE THE FRENCH WHO WERE NOT. MAO REPLIED THAT CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 PEKING 01351 01 OF 02 080650Z

FRANCE HAD EVERY BIT AS MUCH TO FEAR FROM THE SOVIETS AS DID CHINA. ONE NEVER KNEW WHO HIS FRIENDS WERE, HE CONTINUED. IN THE LAST ANALYSIS, EVERY COUNTRY HAD TO RELY ON ITSELF.

6. IN THE COURSE OF THE CONVERSATION, MAO DESCRIBED HIS BODY AS "RIDDLED WITH DISEASE", A REMARK THAT CHOU EN-LAI ATTEMPTED TO PASS OFF AS REFERRING ONLY TO "SOME RHEUMATISM AT THE JOINTS." MAO REFERRED TO A FAST APPROACHING "APPOINTMENT WITH HIS MAKER" (REMINISCENT OF A SIMILAR STATEMENT HE MADE TO EDGAR SNOW IN 1964). MAO'S MOVEMENTS AND PHYSICAL APPEARANCE WERE THOSE OF A VERY OLD MAN. THOUGH NOT EMACIATED, HE IS NO LONGER FAT IN ANY WAY. THE ROUNDNESS OF HIS FACE IS THE RESULT

OF BONE STRUCTURE RATHER THAN FLESH. HE DID NOT SMOKE DURING THE INTERVIEW. AT THE END OF THE CONVERSATION, THE CHAIRMAN ROSE AND SAW HIS GUESTS OUT INTO THE ANTEROOM UNASSISTED.

NOTE BY OC/T: NOT PASSED ABOVE ADDRESSEES.

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PAGE 01 PEKING 01351 02 OF 02 080657Z

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 PEKING 1351

EXDIS

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7. MAO'S ACTIONS AND ENVIRONMENT SEEMED TO FITZGERALD TO BE TIGHTLY CONTROLLED BY THOSE IMMEDIATELY AROUND HIM: PREMIER CHOU, NANCY TANG (WHO SEEMED AT EASE, AND ALMOST COQUETTISH AT TIMES IN DEALING WITH THE CHAIRMAN), AND WANG HAI-JUNG, THE ASSISTANT FOREIGN MINISTER WHO IS ALSO MAO'S MOTHER'S ELDER SISTER'S GRANDDAUGHTER. MAO COMPLAINED MILDLY THAT WANG LIMITED HIS ACTIVITIES. SHEN JO-YUN, ANOTHER YOUNG FEMALE INTERPRETER, WAS ALSO PRESENT, ALTHOUGH FITZGERALD SAID SHE PLAYED NO OBSERVABLE ROLE EXCEPT TO CORRECT NANCY TANG OCCASIONALLY. ALL MEMBERS OF THE GROUP WERE RIGIDLY ATTENTIVE, PARTICULARLY DURING THE PORTION OF THE CONVERSATION THAT DEALT WITH DOMESTIC POLITICS.

8. WANG HUNG-WEN MADE NO ATTEMPT TO ENTER THE CONVERSATION, EXCEPT AT TIMES WHEN THE TALK MOVED TO THE LONG MARCH AND OTHER REMINISCENCES OF THE OLD DAYS. AT THESE JUNCTURES, HE MADE WHAT APPEARED TO BE RATHER DEFENSIVE EFFORTS TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT.

9. FITZGERALD HAS LONG BELIEVED THAT CHOU EN-LAI IS IN FULL COMMAND OF CHINESE AFFAIRS, AND SAID THAT THE
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PAGE 02 PEKING 01351 02 OF 02 080657Z

MEETING STRENGTHENED HIS "CHOU-CENTRIC" VIEW OF CHINESE POLITICS. THE CHAIRMAN'S MIND APPEARS ALERT AND ACTIVE BUT HIS BODY APPEARS TO BE SO FRAIL AS TO PRECLUDE INDEPENDENT POLITICAL ACTION. IT IS OBVIOUS HE IS NO LONGER CAPABLE OF MAKING A PUBLIC SPEECH. FITZGERALD SPECULATED THAT MAO PROBABLY PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ADVISORY ROLE AND THAT CHOU EN-LAI CONSULTS HIM AND GETS HIS BLESSING ON MAJOR ISSUES. HOWEVER, THE SCOPE OF MAO'S EXISTENCE, HIS CONTACT WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD, THE STIMULI AND INFLUENCE TO WHICH HE IS SUBJECTED, APPEAR MANAGED BY CHOU AND AN EXTRAORDINARY GROUP OF YOUNG WOMEN CADRES.

10. COMMENT: FITZGERALD IS A SENSITIVE AND ACCOMPLISHED OBSERVER WHO IS HONEST ABOUT HIS PRECONCEPTIONS. WHILE WE SHARE HIS BELIEF THAT THE PREMIER IS IN CONTROL, WE ARE NOT QUITE AS "CHOU-CENTRIC" AS FITZGERALD. SHEN JO-YUN'S PRESENCE IS PERHAPS A CASE IN POINT. USLO OFFICER HAS OBSERVED THAT SHEN IS ON FAMILIAR TERMS WITH MADAME MAO. THOUGH SHEN IS FAR LESS COMPETENT THAN NANCY TANG, SHE HAS BEEN GIVEN TOP LEVEL INTERPRETING ASSIGNMENTS LATELY, INCLUDING THE TRUDEAU AND WHITLAM VISITS AND CHOU EN-LAI'S TALK WITH NYT COLUMNIST SULZBERGER. WE HAVE RECEIVED REPORTS THAT CHOU EXPRESSED IRRITATION AT HER PERFORMANCE, AND WONDER WHETHER HIS DISSATISFACTION IS NOT BASED ON POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS BEYOND TECHNICAL COMPETENCE. THOUGH THE EVIDENCE IS MEAGER, IT IS CONCEIVABLE THAT SHEN MAY BE HOLDING A WATCHING BRIEF FOR MADAME MAO. WANG HUNG-WEN'S ROLE AND RELATIONSHIP REMAIN A MYSTERY.
BRUCE

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